



Ireland and Ecocriticism: An Introduction

Dr Eóin Flannery (Oxford Brookes University)¹

ABSTRACT

Contemporary Irish history, specifically that of the past twenty years, saw the nature of the relationship between people and land alter dramatically and, in large part, detrimentally. So that while 'land' and 'value' have always been adjacent concepts – the ways in which land came to be valued and hungrily sought after in Irish society reflected a new alignment in the 'structures of feeling' that sustained the relations between Irish people and their surrounding environment. Land became commercialized at accelerated, and unsustainable, rates as the value-system of significant, and influential, sectors of Irish society changed and only one declension of 'value' became dominant: market value. Any ecocritical retrospective of Celtic Tiger Ireland will focus on the idea of values and valuation, but will, naturally, veer away from crass monetaristic valuation towards a reclamation of sustainable ecological and cultural ethics of land valuation.

I

Contemporary Irish history, specifically that of the past twenty years, saw the nature of the relationship between people and land alter dramatically and, in large part, detrimentally. So that while 'land' and 'value' have always been adjacent concepts – the ways in which land came to be valued and hungrily sought after in Irish society reflected a new alignment in the 'structures of feeling' that sustained the relations between Irish people and their surrounding environment. Unoccupied spaces; exposed rural fastnesses; unproductive farmland all became transvalued in an economy that became motored by the unreflective fetishization of property. Land became commercialized at accelerated, and unsustainable, rates as the value-system of significant, and influential, sectors of Irish society changed and only one declension of 'value' became dominant: market value. Any ecocritical retrospective of Celtic Tiger Ireland will focus on the idea of values and valuation, but will, naturally, veer away from crass monetaristic valuation towards a reclamation of sustainable ecological and cultural ethics of land valuation. Writing almost forty years ago in *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams captures the debilitating dynamic that was so recently in the ascendant in Ireland: '[...] we live in a world in which the dominant mode of production and social relationships reaches, impresses, offers to make normal and even rigid, modes of detached, separated, external perception and action: modes of using and consuming rather than

¹ Dr Eóin Flannery (eflannery@brookes.ac.uk) Eóin Flannery is Reader in Irish Literature at Oxford Brookes University, where he is Director of the Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre.

accepting and enjoying people and things' (298). Williams's critique of liberal capitalist sociality is a given, but what is germane to the current discussion is the idea that such a worldview 'detaches' people from their fellow humanity and the proximate domains of non-human ecology. In this vein, Irish society has seen a toxic surfeit of financial investment in land as property in recent times, and this has been matched by a deficient investment in the affective, historical values of the country's geographies. Contrary to a productive ethics of ecological dwelling, Irish property mania was conditioned by erotics of speculation and consumption, as land and property assumed totemic proportions.

Attention to the 'value' of land, and of landscape, has always been in evidence in Irish culture; Irish literary and political histories are replete with variations on Romantic imagology and idioms. Yet in importing the critical methodologies of ecocriticism into the study of contemporary Irish culture, one is guided by the sentiments of the American eco-poet and ecocritic, Gary Snyder, who re-enforces a core tenet of modern ecological thought. Not unlike Williams's implication above, Snyder states: 'Nature and human ethics are not unconnected. The growing expansion of ecological consciousness translates into a deeper understanding of interconnectedness in both nature and history' (2007: 23). Snyder's argument strives to dissolve the nature/culture dyad in lieu of a more symbiotic material relation, which can nourish a moral code of mutual dependence. Within ecocriticism, Snyder's proposition is not unproblematic, as several critics are sceptical of the notion that 'nature' can be spoken for in any truly egalitarian fashion within the sphere of 'representationalist' literature and criticism. Yet Snyder's inclination to provoke a sense of mutual responsibility and co-sustainability still speaks to a more productive form of eco-consciousness than is laterally evident in many neo-liberal Western societies. Specifically, the ethical undertow of Snyder's case is apt to readings of contemporary Irish culture, as the hangover from the Celtic Tiger period leaves many Irish citizens scrambling for a new set of codes by which to live their lives and with which to engage with the altered landscapes of the country. Having been disabused of the long-term tenability of copious wealth; fevered accumulation; and high-value property, it seems appropriate to consider and to endorse a renewed sense of eco-consciousness within the Irish context. Of course this cannot restore the peaks of wealth enjoyed under the sway of the Celtic Tiger economy, but such eco-consciousness can engender productive senses of humility, as well as attachment to place and community. Part of the strength of the ecological writing – creative and critical – is the lateral attention to belonging and responsibility in evidence. Thus, if one of the features of the Celtic Tiger, and its subsequent demise, were feelings of betrayal amid a frenzy of irresponsibility, then the critical resources of ecological thinking offer at least a partial alternative to such mind-sets.

II

One of the most forceful, if at times uneven, ecocritical statements to emerge from within Irish cultural studies is Michael Cronin's extended polemical essay, *The Expanding World: Towards a Politics of Microspection*. Taking direct impetus from the highly influential work on the dynamic relations that obtain between local ecologies and global ecologies in the contemporary world by the ecocritic Ursula K Heise, in her book, *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet*, Cronin impresses the need to recalibrate our notions of what the 'local' can mean for the cultural politics of ecological criticism. Rather than retain a dichotomy that confines the local and the global to perpetual alienation from one another, Cronin suggests that

'contemporary experience can, however, be approached in another way and this is through the prism of what might be termed *micro-modernity*' (7). Contrary to critical orthodoxies that disaggregate the local and the global, and that view the division of locality and globalism as insoluble, Cronin's argument calls for a new departure in attending to the inequities and injustices of our environmental crises. Under this re-oriented optic we might begin 'our analysis from the standpoint of the local not as a point of arrival, a parachute drop for global forces, but as [...] an opening out rather than a closing down, a way of re-enchanting a world grown weary of the jeremiads of cultural entropists' (7); ultimately, 'the world of micro-modernity challenges the orthodoxies of global macro-modernity' (7). Cronin's case has, of course, Irish and international resonances, and is timely in the Irish context given the tragic enthusiasm with which sections of Irish society invested in the promises of globalized openness and networks of credit/consumption during the Celtic Tiger years.

In this context, Ireland became little more than another global outpost, dispensing with any illusions of adherence to local difference as much of its landscape was co-opted into the calculus of economic value. This is not to say that local machinations and interests were not implicated in the concussive experience of global capitalism in Ireland, but that from our present position, a renewed focus upon, or to use the relevant parlance, investment in locality, a reclamation of locality can form the basis of new critical and political positions on Ireland's relationship with global environmental politics. Economic plenty and, apparent, security, seemed to foster political and critical complacency as there was a self-interested embrace of the iniquities and distortions of Ireland's compact with the economic agents of capitalism. For Cronin both our global environmental crises and the ruinous decline of Ireland's economic boom demand the imagination of political alternatives. As he suggests: '[...] we must now think of liberation as going deeper, slower. In other words, in advocating this shift of perspective, we wish to suggest that it is possible to develop a new *politics of microspeciation* which seeks to expand the possibilities of the local, not reduce them, and which offers the opportunity to reconfigure positively our social, economic and political experience of the fundamentals of space and time' (8). 'Dwelling in a place' does not, of necessity, and following Cronin, have to be inward-looking, reactionary, or conservative. In a world, or country, that was/is so in thrall to the borderless universality of global and globalised capital, such critical and creative re-orientations are profoundly utopian.

Later in the same piece, Cronin, firstly, invokes the work and methods of the cartographer and nature writer, Tim Robinson, as a model for his politics of microspeciation and, secondly, he expands upon the notion of 'dwelling' cited above. Both of these brief discussions illuminate the materials and the methodologies of Robinson's enterprises on Aran, in the Burren and in Connemara, and it is worth alighting upon Cronin's general comments on 'dwelling' before proceeding to a 'microscopic' discussion of Robinson's role within Cronin's ecological politics. For Cronin 'What looking closely at the present and past of what immediately surround us involves, among other things, is a commitment to dwelling knowingly in a specific place [...] separation from the world around us [can] lead to a well-documented ecological harm [...]' (76). Cronin's terminology is not entirely remote from the largely American-sited school of environmental thought that advocates for an 'ethics of dwelling' – in the tradition of writers such as Aldo Leopold. Yet, throughout Cronin's discussion, his consciousness of how these local places are implicated within, often overdetermined by, the mechanics of global capital is readily apparent. What is of crucial

concern for Cronin is the location of local difference, a local difference that recognizes its own proximity to what he terms other 'micro-sites' (86). In other words, discovering and appreciating the complexity of the local can, potentially, engender a consciousness of the myriad vulnerabilities of other global sites of differentiated locality; as he concludes, 'The movement inwards is an opening up, not a shutting down' (86). Awareness of local place – an awareness informed by spatial and temporal depth – can move us towards an empathetic ecological consciousness. Instead of the bleak consequences of Irish land transvaluation occasioned by the Celtic Tiger, this renewed ecological ethic does not privilege legal ownership – which too often comes without guarantees of ecological responsibility – but is underwritten by the longer-term human and non-human histories of local places. And this is precisely the kind of ethic that Cronin traces in Robinson's voluminous verbal and visual textualizations of Ireland's Western seaboard, as well as embodied in his exhausting physical fieldwork and methodologies.

Robinson's combined projects strive, in Cronin's view, 'to restore the infinite complexity of these spaces through a process of endotic travel, partly by his own decelerated practice of walking the fields of Inismore but partly also through the memories of older inhabitants, his informants, whose physical slowing down becomes a creative act of remembering' (59). Rather than seek the 'exotic,' Robinson's travels are 'endotic', local and inward, and are contrary to the regnant spirit of speed that conditions contemporary patterns of global living and consumption. But what is more significant is the premium placed here on the 'embodied' methodologies of Robinson's research. From an ecocritical perspective, Robinson's work is not sympathetic to any branch of anti-humanist or misanthropic 'deep' ecological politics. As the latter sentence above indicates, his work is firmly rooted in, and sourced from, the embodied oral knowledge repositories of Aran's and Connemara's local topographies. Equally, and this is crucial to an ecocritical understanding of Robinson's work, Cronin underscores the, literally, pedestrian nature of its compilation. Both of these structural features of Robinson's work are redemptively laborious; in other words they are 'linked to the rehabilitation of dwelling as a creative or enabling way of engaging with places subject to the peripheralizing dismissal of velocity [...] Implicit [...] is a relationship to land and place which is not wholly overdetermined by an obsession with ownership' (59).

Though much of Robinson's writing is preoccupied with, and sustained by, the 'deep' historical and human historical traces and narratives of Connemara and Aran, across his work he evinces a long-term environmental investment in the contemporary well-being of these landscapes. His career is noteworthy for its recuperative and preservative labours. His most recent publication refers to Ireland as a land of shortcuts, and it laments a dearth of genuine lived affection for local place in Ireland – an absence which eased the transactions and lifestyles of the Celtic Tiger property 'boom.' And at junctures in his broader historical surveys, Robinson draws upon his own experiences of such avaricious and destructive transvaluations of land in Connemara. In the first volume of his Connemara trilogy, *Connemara: Listening to the Wind*, while dwelling upon the agencies of placenames and the lingering marks of the mid-nineteenth century Great Famine, among other topics, Robinson registers a specific concern about the marketization of rural Irish landscapes, and at the same time, abstracts to state the case for the mutual implication of human and non-human nature. In other words, we witness the co-location of Irish ecological degradation and a broad ecocritical assertion of human responsibility for the environment. Pointing to the perilous alchemy of the property 'boom,' Robinson notes that at the beginning of the

twenty-first century 'the selling off of Connemara is immensely profitable to landowners and developers, and as a result planning regulations are flagrantly subverted, with the connivance of clientele-dependent politicians. It corrupts our eyes, we see every field as a potential house site, flaunting a price tag instead of its ragged hawthorn tree' (2006: 89).

Robinson's allusion to the legal-political nexus that facilitated the manic consumerism of the Celtic Tiger period needs no development at this point, and, indeed, tensions between local communities along Ireland's western seaboard and exogenous property developers pre-dates the exertions of the Celtic Tiger. But what is provocative in the contemporary context in terms of ecological thought and environmental awareness, is Robinson's reference to the fact that our very modes of perception, our temperaments, are remoulded and distorted by the white heat of economic modernization and financial profiteering. There was, in this view, a radical and retrograde recalibration of how people 'lived' in nature; as we have noted the alchemical faculties of property speculation sundered tracts of the Irish landscape and they became concretized into commodities. But, as Robinson makes plain, the actual physical assault on the landscape is merely a symptom and is not the underlying disease. The pure promise of profit consumes, and urges consumption, and it was such a promise that re-enchanted the Irish landscape as a canvass for excess. One might argue that ecocriticism seeks to re-enchance landscapes that have been evacuated of affective currency, but without retreating to ahistorical nostalgia. As Robinson argues above, a form of corrupted enchantment prevailed, superseding history and myth with short-term presentism, which, of course, came buttressed with its own self-sustaining myths of prosperity. But Robinson's ecological position, which challenges this latter view, is not underwritten by an idealist's view of non-human nature. He does not subscribe to a version of non-human nature as wildly pristine and independent of human influence. Crucially, Robinson is dissatisfied with the neglectful complacencies afforded by a dyadic nature/culture framework.

In a recent essay, 'A Land without Shortcuts,' originally delivered as the Parnell Fellow at the University of Cambridge in 2011, Robinson bemoans the increasing dearth of affective investment in the Irish landscape. Returning to one of the recurring preoccupations of his writing, and his methodologies, Robinson nominates the current moment as the 'the age of the shortcut' (2012: 41). Again intersecting with Cronin's critique of capitalist modernity's cult of speed, which diminishes place to traversable space, Robinson argues that this historical period trades 'space for time; technology is shortcuts, ever bridging the gap between intent and fulfilment. And, technology having hurried us into the present crux of global warming, it now offers to deliver us from it, in return for the ground beneath our feet' (2012: 41). The immediate context here of Robinson's protests is his scepticism about many new technological panaceas for global climate change. Yet, what is more relevant, for the moment, is the devaluation and ignorance of place that these equally destructive technologies create and thrive upon. Speed conditions much of what passes for daily life in the developed world, the Global North. Speed and desire are complicit in the relegation of place to commoditized space. Rather than reflect upon, inquire about, or, ultimately begin to understand and value, place, our attention spans have been disabled so that velocity stands as an indissoluble virtue of what it is to be 'modern' in the developed world and beyond. And even within Irish society, while we persistently protest and retain our historical consciousness of our language, landscape and culture, in Robinson's view, we have traded in these values. Contrarily, we retain a hypocritical and superficial interest in the toponymic

fabric of our country, one that has mutated in what he terms 'The Old Woman of the Four Green-Field Sites' (2012: 41). However, Robinson's more grave assessment is that 'this Irish fascination with placenames is too often purely nominal and does not extend to caring for the places themselves; nostalgia stands in for conservation and convenience trumps all' (2012: 40).

The degradation of the Irish landscape and its ecologies is implicit in Robinson's argument here. But the more pressing issue is that if Irish people simply feign commitment to place and its naming, then the value of land and place is equated/calculated in other terms and scales. The obvious consequence for Robinson, then, is that if place is valued according to the currency of the market, of the property exchange and access to raw materials, then all localities are evacuated of historical depth and difference – in this regard speed and homogeneity become complicit agents. Furthermore, the kinds of superficial attachments attributed to Irish people by Robinson are indicative of a society that has abdicated any sense of duty or of responsibility to their landscape of places, and the histories embedded within, and which emanate from, those topographies. In the end, this recent intervention by Robinson performs a crucial, and instructive, function; Robinson indicts a culture that chooses to by-pass the complexities of its proximate geographies, abandoning them to the logic of market capitalism and short-term economic opportunism.

III

The field of Irish cultural studies has yet to exploit fully the critical and analytical resources of ecological criticism, though some early, recent 'green' shoots have appeared (Cusick: 2010; Wenzell 2009; Wall 2011; Potts 2012). Indeed very little sustained and enabling historical or critical writing has emanated from the field that might productively contribute to international conversations on the political and cultural implications of global environmental change. There have always been creative and critical engagements with the Irish landscape – a trend partly occasioned by the country's protracted history of colonialism [a prime concern of ecological criticism]. But these creative and critical legacies have yet to yield a body of ecological critical writing worthy of the name. In his essay, 'Challenges to an Irish Eco-criticism,' John Wilson Foster addresses this very prospect; what form can a putative Irish franchise of ecocriticism take? What parameters should be set in the inauguration and the development of such a disciplinary new departure within Irish literary and cultural studies? Wilson Foster's essay is simultaneously speculative and suggestive; the piece asks questions about the form and contents of an Irish ecocriticism, while at the same time offering indicative texts and authors. Spanning mainstays of the Irish literary canon such as James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, Seamus Heaney and Padraic Colum, as well as essayists and nature writers, Wilson Foster argues for a sundering of the intractable intellectual borders that have long persisted between science and arts/humanities in Ireland. As he concludes: 'I have tried to enumerate Irish paradigmatic perceptions and representations of the natural world that still exert great cultural influence on and in our literature – the aesthetic, the scientific, the economic, the Romantic, the nativist, the religious, the folkloristic. Of these, only the economic and scientific have not been culturally celebrated by many literary critics, while science's productions – from nature-writing to scientific papers and monographs – are largely ignored by critics and anthologists, and by writers who are scientifically unsympathetic, indifferent or unconservant. Yet eco-criticism requires the scientific paradigm [...]' The contribution is a vital metacritical intervention in

the burgeoning area of Irish ecocritical studies, and it engages with recent international and Irish publications on culture and ecology, including those by scholars including: Glen A. Love, Christine Cusick, and Tim Wenzell. Like any truly enabling and pioneering intervention, Wilson Foster's essay asks as many questions as it answers, provoking scholars to trace and to test the boundaries and the possibilities of this novel field within Irish cultural studies.

Foster's essay looks to the future of Irish ecocritical studies by productively engaging with the past; tracking many of the seminal interventions in Irish nature writing. And in her essay, 'The Frosty Winters of Ireland: Poems of Climate Crisis 1739-41,' Lucy Collins also casts her critical eye on Irish literary history, reading the poetic responses of three eighteenth century poets, William Dunkin; Thomas Hallie Delamayne; and Laurence Whyte, to extreme weather events in Ireland. As Collins suggests: 'While all three poets under consideration in this essay are formally educated, they register the emotional power of extreme weather and the new aesthetic possibilities that changing literary tastes can bring. The experience of extreme weather conditions, and their tragic human consequences, confronts these poets with the challenge to represent the facts directly, while tradition compels them not to abandon the status of familiar poetic modes. This creative tension, which can be traced throughout the texts explored here, mirrors the larger ethical challenge of representing traumatic events in verse.' Collins' focus on these poets, then, intersects with more recent and contemporary debates within ecocriticism centred on the politics of representation vis-à-vis non-human ecology. The works of each of the poets are different in their relative foci; across the works, as Collins outlines, the crisis of linguistically representing the hardships effected by natural phenomena is played out by Dunkin in his poem 'The Frosty Winters of Ireland,' which as Collins suggests: 'is a poem of awe and horror, rather than understanding and mastery, and its lengthy sentences with their complex clauses show language at full stretch to accommodate the act of appalling witness.' In a more political vein, Whyte's work centres on the socio-economic aftermaths of the unrelenting cold weather, the widespread poverty and hunger resultant in an economy that is largely subsistent agrarian in practice. Neither of the previous crises are alien to contemporary ecological criticism, and, as such, Collins' essay is a potent reminder of the endurance of, and problems attached to, literary and cultural responses to climatic extremity. As Collins concludes: 'Constantly changing weather is a marker of vulnerability that the passage to modernity cannot quite overcome. Centuries after these powerful poems were written, the close connections between the weather and human behaviour continue to challenge and engage us.'

If poetry has traditionally been the genre most heavily theorized and critiqued by ecocritics, then Maureen O'Connor's essay, 'Animals and the Irish Mouth in Edna O'Brien's Fiction,' furnishes a necessary supplement to the corpus of ecocritical readings of prose fiction. O'Connor's essay is a sweeping survey of the work of one of the pre-eminent Irish novelists of the latter half of the twentieth-century, Edna O'Brien. Often dismissed over the course of her career as a purveyor of 'popular' or 'women's' fiction, O'Brien's *oeuvre*, O'Connor persuasively argues is profoundly challenging to heteronormative notions of corporeality and desire. O'Brien's fiction is, for Connor, shadowed by death and abjection for all its apparent treatments of desire, femininity and fecundity. While Wilson Foster's and Collins' essays might well be termed respectively, as metacritical and literary historical, O'Connor's seems closer to an eco-feminist foray in Irish literary studies. Yet such a nomination could also be countered by the fact that O'Connor draws on theoretical work from postcolonial studies, feminism, psychoanalysis, deconstructive ecocriticism, and animal studies. And

armed with such a complex and enriching theoretical arsenal, O'Connor then proceeds to read O'Brien's short and novelistic fiction, detailing how 'the homology between human and animal mouths organizes representations of the maternal throughout O'Brien's work in a complex shuttling amongst metaphoric registers.'

Taking the increased and ecologically degrading suburbanization of Ireland during the Celtic Tiger property 'boom' as its starting point, Eamonn Slater's essay dwells on the metonymic function, and the empirical and material realities of the 'front lawn.' As Slater suggests at the beginning of his argument: 'The front lawns of suburbia are easily identified by their clear visible presence, but, as I argue, their very mundaneness conceals a complexity of how natural processes metabolize with social processes. It would appear to be obvious that any investigation into grass should use Ireland as its empirical case study as Britain was for understanding capitalism in the nineteenth century, which Marx did. The reason to choose Ireland is that grass apparently grows so naturally and abundantly in Ireland, that it has created its own iconic representation of Ireland – Ireland of the 'forty shades of green.' Slater's essay reminds us of the ways in which non-human ecologies are domesticated in preened and aestheticized forms, but further, his piece lays out, in empirical detail, the organic processes that are invested in the production of these cosmetic ecologies. Such attentiveness to scientific cycles is, of course, one of the essential ingredients of ecocriticism, as canvassed by Wilson Foster above. Slater's essay also transfuses ecological criticism with a 'green' Marxian perspective, and in this way the essay intersects with the important work undertaken by John Foster Bellamy (2000) in foregrounding the Marxian precedents for contemporary ecological criticism. Slater's scientific and social scientific perspectives, then, enhance and complement the metacritical, literary historical, and eco-feminist and theoretical readings to which it is adjacent in this special issue.

References

- Cronin, Michael. *The Expanding World: Towards a Politics of Microspection* (London: Zero Books, 2012).
- Cusick Christine ed. *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010).
- Foster Bellamy, John. *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).
- Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- Potts, Donna. *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2012).
- Robinson, Tim. *Connemara: Listening to the Wind* (London: Penguin, 2006).
- , 'A Land without Shortcuts,' *The Dublin Review* 46 Spring 2012, pp. 25-44.
- Snyder, Gary. 'Ecology, Literature and the New World Disorder: Gathered on Okinawa,' *Back on the Fire: Essays* (Berkeley CA: Counterpoint, 2007), pp. 21-35.
- Wall, Eamonn. *Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions* (South Bend IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011).
- Wenzell, Tim. *Emerald Green: An Ecocritical Study of Irish Literature* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009).
- Williams, Raymond. *The Country and The City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).